

Male and Female Executives' Responses to Career Transition: Are There Gender Differences?

Does gender impact successful career transition? The simple answer is yes; the complex answer is yes.

After coaching hundreds of male and female executives through career transition, I have noticed that men are challenged with channeling their anger while women are challenged with channeling their grief. On the surface it appears that most people regardless of gender must successfully move through the normal stages of grief best described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross as: shock/denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Most career transition coaches understand these phases and accept that clients will cycle through some or all of the phases. We also know that the model is not linear. I have coached individuals who start with anger, or depression, then they cycle back to denial, then on the surface they appear to accept the change, then they cycle to depression, and so on.

What is not readily known by career coaches is that the family of the transitioning executive also experiences some or all of these grief stages – and this will ultimately impact the executive's transition success.

In coaching male executives, I have found that the ability to manage and channel anger is the most important challenge. Some male clients show up during the first meetings with the career coach and use bravado to cover their pain. Others are angry with the coach, the “system” or hierarchical decision makers from their former employer, HR, department management, the senior leadership team, the board of directors, or their subordinates – no one seems to escape their enmity.

On the other hand, in coaching female executives, I have observed that the ability to manage and channel grief and guilt are their most important challenges. Most female clients feel personally responsible for the termination decision and they engage in playing the “if only” game. If only they had not made that disastrous presentation; if only they had not offered an opposing opinion at the last national sales meeting; if only they had not been so accommodating to an underperforming employee or subordinate team, if only...

Female clients also feel responsible for their former team and they spend a lot of unproductive time trying to right whatever wrongs are occurring in the aftermath of the termination. Generally speaking, female executives try to help their former team as a means of staying connected, while male executives tend to maintain ties to their former subordinates and peers as a means of staying in control.

Are male and female executives equally successful in moving through career transition? Yes and no. Both males and females will experience crises, set-backs, challenges and hopefully success. In any case, the career transition coach's role is to find effective ways to reveal the client's behaviors to the clients and help them find ways to manage the anger, grief or guilt in a manner that will allow for the forward-movement producing emotions that foster creativity, problem resolution, acceptance and creating a new reality and a new future.

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Christine M. Glasco consults to company executives, business owners and non-profit leaders on career management/career transformation strategies and strategic leadership development solutions. To provide you with clarity on how to achieve the next steps in your career, go to www.christineglasco.com and request a complimentary copy of: ***Is Your Career on Track? Assessment and e-Workbook.***

Email: info@CGconsultinggroup.net Phone: 1.940.367.0837